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ABSTRACT

The problems of public confidence in higher education are addressed with emphasis on fundamental doubts about the efficacy of the higher education process, the proper role of colleges and universities, and their effectiveness with respect to rising costs, both to the tuition-paying parent and to the tax payer. Suggestions are made for (1) agreeing on basic principles about which there will be no negotiation; (2) focusing on known and identifiable audiences that matter, such as trustees, influential alumni, legislators, church leaders, student and faculty leaders, and employees; (3) planning specific programs tailored to specific relationships, responsibilities, and interests of known audiences; (4) emphasis of person-to-person communication at the highest possible level; (5) effective use of the mass media; (6) preparation for long-term planning; and (7) facing the issues with enthusiasm and conviction. It is concluded that the emerging new communities of higher education will be led by those who are successful in forming a coalition based on consensus, on fundamental principles that all agree are worth preserving, open for full and free communication and exchange of ideas for implementation, ready to allocate responsibility to competence, and with enthusiasm for the process. (LBH)

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TO HARNESS ADVOCACY

An Informal Essay on the Current Decline in Public Confidence in Higher Education and Some Suggestions for an Enlightened Public Relations Strategy to Help Overcome it

BY

Francis C. Pray*

One of the more traumatic experiences undergone by many educators in recent years has been the dramatic deterioration of public confidence in higher education.

Far more serious than the widespread doubts about the ability of higher education to manage its own house caused by the events of the troublesome 60's, the present confidence gap arises from fundamental doubts about the efficacy of the higher education process, about the proper role of colleges and universities, and especially about their effectiveness with respect to rising costs, both to the tuition-paying parent and to the tax payer.

To say that there is a crisis in confidence also faced by government, growing for years but exacerbated by Watergate, and faced by business, is not to spread the problem and therefore dilute its impact but to emphasize its serious and widespread nature.

Nor is it enough for educators to say that, "If the public only understood us better, much of the problem would disappear." This is a dangerous assumption. Perhaps the public understands only too well. The words of the

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child who cried, "Mother, the king is not wearing any clothes," are now paraphrased and applied by men and women with new insights into the weaknesses and at least partial irrelevance of much of what they see of higher education.

It should not come as a shock to educational administrators to find that men and women with clear eyes who are giving up blind relief in the utter infallibility of the organized church, who see and for the first time begin to understand the depth of ineptitude in certain aspects of government, who understand that there are abuses of consumers by some business corporations, who discover fiscal irresponsibility and learn of the use of classified information to cover up gross errors by the military, now express something less than blind awe of the higher education establishment, no matter how arcane its rituals or how colorful its academic hoods and gowns.

Yet, paradoxically, the time was never better than now to win confidence of the public in response to evidence of creative programs and aspirations based on the real issues.

This time must be used to harness advocacy.

The Chinese have a word for "crisis," it is said, which combines the words for "danger" and "opportunity." We have observed for years that when Old Main burns down in a wintry holocaust, destroying prized records, facutly offices or student rooms, alumni and donors will spring out of the woodwork in response to college plans for rebuilding something better, more relevant, more imaginative, to meet its needs in the future. The event raises interest and focusses attention and produces a tension which can be triggered to produce action by imaginative and compelling plans and programs, for productive response.

At a time when attention is focussed on the colleges and universities of America as never before because of other kinds of crises, institutions can now respond with imaginative plans, "architectural sketches" for new programs, answers to recoup losses in public confidence or invitations for constructive help and advice with renewed hope of gaining a new awareness.

How, then, do we proceed?

1. Agree on Basic Principles About Which There Will Be No Negotiation

First, educators must do something which they have so far failed to do -- they must agree on the irreducible number of basic positions which they, too believe are non-negotiable, on which higher education must stand or fall, and build their position on these and explain and "interpret" them until there is no question as to the rocks of conviction on which the educational establishment stands.

Legislators on Capital Hill and in states, counties, and cities; parents, and tax-payers, constantly call for an enunciation of common plans and principles.

The prestigious educational associations are at a loss to reconcile the widely differing philosophies of financing espoused by various groups and individuals representing public, private, church-related, and proprietary institutions.

Yet, perhaps forgotten, or perhaps deemed so obvious that they are never stated, there <u>are</u> certain basic assumptions about which higher education can agree--<u>must</u> agree, or lose all hope of establishing a basis for trust and understanding. And if these seem self-evident to educators, at least if enunciated they would give laymen a notion that there are <u>some</u> common beliefs, even in education.

I suggest that among these are the beliefs in the value of the search for truth as an end in itself; the need for complete freedom to pursue

knowledge, the obligation to have respect for opinion based on reason, and the absolute denial of force as an element in persuasion.

It is the failure to enunciate these "non-negotiable" principles that has left a partial vacuum in the effort to have understanding of what higher education is all about. Into this vacuum crowd all the other considerations which, valid in themselves, are not referred back to a common base and introduce confusion rather than understanding.

Failure to come to any statement or identification of basic principles which all higher education can agree upon as essential to the success of the academic enterprise makes it difficult to mount an effective program of interpretation for higher education. Interpret what? Without the clear enunciation of this common base which, when understood, will unite reasonable men and women in support of colleges and universities, other programs of interpretation, justification and explanation will fail to solve tension or prevent further doubt and questioning unless one is ready to accept peace borne out of exhaustion, or compliance based on discouragement.

2. Zero in on Known and Identifiable Audiences Which Matter

To try, with limited resources, to reach the American masses to "sell" higher education is probably an exercise in futility.

Decisions affecting higher education are not made by masses. They are made externally by relatively small numbers of persons -- trustees, influential alumni, legislators and government officials, leaders of churches sponsoring colleges or universities, a relatively small number of powerful private individuals, and a few others.

Decisions affecting higher education are also made internally through pressures and influences exercised by leaders among students, faculty, employees, as well as management.

All these persons are identifiable, locatable, reachable through fairly simple techniques, and subject to built-in interests predisposing them to give attention to communication about the problems and crises in higher education.

To try to communicate with everybody about everything is a way to communicate almost nothing to anyone.

3. Plan Specific Programs Tailored to Specific Relationships, Responsibilities, and Interests of Known Audiences

The college or university, therefore, which wishes to undertake an effective program of interpreting its work, should first of all identify the specific persons it feels it must influence and then design specially and individually tailored programs of persuasion and communication for each individual person or relatively homogeneous group.

One place to begin, certainly, is with the college or university trustees. These men and women literally hold in their hands the control and to a large extent the destiny of higher education. Yet, as a group across America, trustees are too often uncommitted to, often almost non-committal about, their basic legal and moral responsibility to contribute real leadership to their institutions. Particularly is this too often true of trustees of state-controlled institutions who sometimes conceive of themselves as budget or political watchdogs rather than as interpreters of and sponsors for the institutions in their charge.

It is now agreed that the trustee stands in a new and dynamic relationship to the institution, concerned with the enhancement of its prestige, the support of its programs, the interpretation of its objectives, and the guidance required in the constant definition and re-definition of its goals.

A few alert institutions are mounting special programs for trustees, involving them with students and faculty, holding trustee workshops to

immerse them in the agony of the dilemmas so they will not be tempted to give simplistic answers to complicated problems. Understanding and commitment must begin at the trustee level or it will spread little further.

Similar programs of interpretation can be planned, administered, and undertaken with other identified groups. Just to list a few might be instructive:

Legislators (the programs of the Southern Regional Education Board in legislator education are outstanding),

The uncommitted and non-committed student (a major audience with which almost no systematic attempt has been made to open dialogue in terms of education as to causes of tension or involvement in a solution of tensions),

Alumni bodies (some extremely thoughtful attempts have been made to communicate problems and processes to alumni of institutions but, for the most part, these have been inept, timid, or incomplete where they exist at all).

Massive information programs may have their place, but they are only useful <u>after</u> personal and constituency commitments on some more direct basis have been established.

Interpretation has to proceed most rigorously of all on the inside of the institution.

Student and faculty demands for places on the board of trustees may be prompted more by a desperate desire for better communication than because students and faculty feel they can exercise the responsibilities or the management necessities of trustees. And the panic-prompted moves toward homogeneity of management in an effort to provide better communications threatens to create a porridge of confused governance units, thus diluting competence in each area, weakening the machinery for responsible action, and further exacerbating the problem in almost every dimension.

Attempts to share the responsibility for everything among everybody is not the answer.

New patterns of community communication through college and university councils now being established rapidly across the country probably provide the best answer for the internal phase of the problem of tension. Here trustees, faculty, students, administration, perhaps with the addition of limited numbers of alumni and "public representatives", can thresh out in community discussion the basic issues of policy, seeking consensus as to the identification of those areas where competence for solution lies and then making referrals to the appropriate responsible bodies such as trustees, the student organizations, the faculty senates, appropriate administrative officers, and so forth, for action.

4. Emphasize Person-to-Person Communication and at the Highest Possible Level

Remember that Pliny, the Younger, once said: "We are more affected by words we hear, for though what we read in books may be more pointed, there is something about the voice which makes a deeper impression on the mind."

After the institution has determined its priorities and responses to the problems causing tension, the president, as chief spokesman, with the assistance of his staff, should wisely plan for personal appearances in prestige situations before audiences of critical importance to the institution in order to transmit, face-to-face, through speaking, his own concern, the institutional position, and programs proposed for the future. If he be not a persuasive speaker, other spokesmen should be found, but in any event, the power and persuasiveness of the face-to-face exposure, when it can be used effectively, must certainly be exploited.

In addition to the president, as chief spokesman, others of the college

community, including trustees, should be briefed, trained if necessary, and assisted in making such public appearances in planned contexts as will suggest that the college or university has a program, has been thoughtful about facing its problems, has the courage to discuss them openly, has confidence in the future, approaches the future with confidence and zeal, and is optimistic about the outcome.

5. Use the Mass Media -- Do Not Let Them Use You

One of the surprising and almost totally unexpected triumphs of militant students and others wishing to disrupt the college or university campus is the degree of sophistication with which they exploit the great public media of television, radio, and the press. Playing directly upon the preoccupation of the media with headlines and conflict, small groups and even single students have succeeded beyond a press agent's dreams in getting public exposure for their actions.

The institution and its public relations arm too often have been caught asleep at the switch; or the public relations arm has been inhibited in response by a lack of planning for possible exigencies or by indecisiveness, uncertainty, or fear of or hostility toward the media felt by those in high authority. In any case, the institution has come off badly in the battle for the headlines.

It must have been said by someone that if you are not ready to fight fire with fire, at least you should be wearing an asbestos suit. Most colleges and universities have done neither and have been badly burned by stories and events to which they were not prepared to respond. These incidents, standing alone, have misled the public as to the true state of affairs, confused it with regard to the position of the institution, or persuaded it that the institution is incapable of response because of

uncertainty, ineptitude or lack of plans.

It is perhaps too much to ask that bull-horns be fought with bull-horns or that dirty words be answered with dirty words, but supineness in response through the public media, is as disastrous as unbridled anger.

It is suggested that the institution, with the assistance of co-opted advisors either from outside professional firms or trusted members of the media, with concerned faculty and student representation, organize task forces on media response to plan not only the strategy but also the tactics of a communications program designed to meet emergencies head-to-head in such a way as to connote reason, sincerity, concern and openness on the part of the institution.

Canned pre-releases will not solve the problem. They are breached by unexpected tactics just as was the Maginot Line. Availability of physical equipment for communications, agreement on strategy, instant accessibility for comment, and, above all, an institutional professional communication program based on sound (and tested) philosophy, are all prerequisites.

6. Prepare for the Long Haul -- and a Partial Reprise

Earlier, it was suggested that accountability must be based upon sound programs, soundly conceived, responsive to contemporary needs, adequately interpreted.

Over and above the programs of the individual institutions there is an opportunity for more effective joint action through existing educational consortia, local and regional groups and national associations in higher education, to establish consensus on the contribution of education to human life and society in terms of the great affirmations of the value of knowledge, respect for truth, and freedom for search and experiment.

To be sure, individuals form concepts and beliefs about all higher education from their experience with their alma mater, or local colleges, or from what they hear of the experiences in the colleges of their children and friends. That their knowledge is so often superficial should give pause to presidents and other educators. That they are so often commendatory or at least tolerant of higher education is a good fortune heartily to be appreciated. But there is little evidence that the average legislator or the average trustee and certainly not the average alumnus has any substantial insight into the relationship of the knowledge industry of research and teaching to the creation of wealth, to the hope of a better society, to the prospects of a cleaner and healthier environment, or to the understanding and resolutions of human tensions which result in crime, mental disability, and poverty. And to believe that the average citizen has even an inkling of these relationships is naive.

Much may have been done to allay suspicion of individual institutions and to build a degree of enthusiasm and loyalty for individual colleges and universities as local industries, alma maters, or training opportunities for youth; but very little has been done by the spokesmen for higher education at large or as representatives of major groupings to transmit and secure an understanding of the fundamental objectives of higher education, and for the conditions which must exist to guarantee its continued effectiveness.

Educators and education need not speak with a single voice on <u>everything</u>, but if they cannot speak with a single voice on <u>anything</u> the media will continue to be the message and the message will not be helpful.

7. Face the Issues With Style

And then there must be added one single final ingredient: some element of life and enthusiasm and conviction; some quality of directed action in response to the action and enthusiasm of students and others who, whatever their motivation and however limited may be their experience or perspective, at least bring with their actions qualities which are not best faced by grimness, over-reaction and fear.

Pareto, the great nineteenth century sociologist, pointed out that people rarely act on the basis of reason alone. We know this now, if we seldom thought of it before. Colleges somehow seem to have lost something of the fire and conviction and excitement, some of the sense of dedication which characterized their early administrations and faculties. This zeal, this enthusiasm, this heady persuasive conviction of the worth of the institution I would try to capture and have others share with me in the current climate of tension and unrest. Some of the administrators who have conspicuously lacked these qualities have most conspicuously failed.

The emerging new communities of higher education will be led by those who are successful in forming a coalition based on consensus, on fundamental principles which all agree are worth preserving, open for full and free communication and give and take of ideas for implementation, ready to allocate responsibility to competence, and fired by enthusiasm for the process.